

Dragonshards

House Phiarlan, Part Three

By Keith Baker



The Serpentine Table

The elves of House Phiarlan are known across Khorvaire as master artisans and entertainers. House Phiarlan uses a five-headed hydra as its symbol, with a head for each of the five artistic demesnes: memory, motion, music, shape, and shadow. But while the hydra has five heads, it also has a shadow -- and this represents the Serpentine Table, the sixth demesne that lies hidden beneath the surface of the house.

After the first war between Aerenal and Argonnessen, the rulers of Aerenal needed an elite force that could serve as the eyes and ears of the Undying Court. The phiarlans were already welcomed in every realm, and the Sibling Kings sought their aid. The elders of the Tialaen, Shol, and Elorrenthi lines summoned their most cunning and capable heirs to serve at the Serpentine Table. For millennia this network of observers helped maintain order in Aerenal, until the appearance of the Mark of Shadows pushed the phiarlans into disfavor. The elves brought the Serpentine Table to Khorvaire, where its roots spread across the land.

Few know where to find the citadel of the Serpentine Table, and the DM must decide where to place it in his campaign. Every Phiarlan enclave has an observer who serves as a liaison with the Table, and this person arranges jobs and ensures that the local heirs of the house do not interfere with Serpentine operations. But the actual agents of the Table are hidden even from this liaison; they are often scattered throughout the community and concealed behind layer upon layer of false identity. The true spymaster of a major city weaves her web in the shadows, and no one should ever know her connection to the house.

Not all of the spies of House Phiarlan belong to the Serpentine Table. Many independents broke away during the Thuranni feud, but a few private cabals remain -- proud families and independent adventurers who prefer to operate outside of the strict hierarchy of the house. As long as these groups maintain the honor of the house and do not interfere with Serpentine operations, they are left in peace.

Hiring the House

The artistic endeavors of House Phiarlan fill the house coffers with gold. From a purely financial standpoint, the house could survive without selling the services of its spies. But there is more to the world than gold. Kings, cardinals, and dragonmark barons rely on the Serpentine Table, and the house thrives on the influence it gains through its actions. By choosing what jobs to accept and which to decline, the Serpentine Table has the power to shape Khorvaire. Every act -- from the assassination of an upstart general to the recovery of a stolen heirloom for a wealthy merchant -- increases the power of the house. Only the lords of the Serpentine Table know how the house plans to use this power.

House Phiarlan may not rely on the Serpentine Table for its gold, but that doesn't mean that the services of Serpentine spies come cheaply. The house prefers to deal with powerful and influential people, and the blacksmith who wants to spy on his wayward wife should hire an inquisitive from House Tharashk.

Information Gathering: The hidden citadel of the Serpentine Table houses a corps of diviners, and its identity vault holds locks of hair and personal items taken from thousands of the most important people of Khorvaire. *Serpentine mirrors* empower and enhance the powers of the Mark of Shadow, and dragonmark diviners devote their time to shadow-gazing and spying through the ether. Phiarlan observers pass information to Serpentine handlers, who communicate with the lords of the Table with *scrystones*. And every day the knowledge of the house grows.

An old secret that one could find elsewhere with effort -- the name of a former king's mistress, which could also be pried from the vaults of the Library of Korranberg -- usually costs 10 to 100 gp. However, the price could go up based on the impact the secret may have. If the name of the mistress could reveal a forgotten heir who could unseat King Boranel, the Serpentine Table could raise its price a hundredfold -- or refuse to reveal it at all.

Information that can be acquired through the use of *scrying* has a base cost of 280 gp. Long-term magical surveillance generally costs 2,000 gp/day. However, the house has a limited number of focus items that can sustain extended surveillance, and this service may not be available at all times.

Beyond scrying, the Table relies on agents in the field. If a spy is already in place and can acquire the desired information without risk, a secret might cost 100 gp. A complex operation requiring a dozen of elves to put their lives on the line -- say, an extraction from Dreadhold -- could cost tens of thousands of gold pieces. Ultimately DM must decide the price based on the resources the task requires and the impact the action will have on the campaign.

Protection: A continual stream of information flows through House Phiarlan, and a client can pay a monthly fee to be alerted about any activity that poses a threat to her or relates to a subject of her choosing. Depending on the depth of the coverage, this can cost thousands of gold pieces, and few people take advantage of it. But when a party of adventurers plots against a wealthy criminal, there's always the chance that she'll receive a telepathic *scrystone* warning from House Phiarlan!

Violence and Theft: House Phiarlan has no special dispensation to break the law, and a captured Serpentine assassin will suffer the same consequences as any other criminal. Serpentine liaisons require full disclosure about the reasons driving an assignment. Assassination requires excellent justification, and the house never kills or kidnaps a client in good standing -- one of the reasons rulers prefer to work with the house instead of against it. They are more willing to abduct than kill; House Phiarlan may not kill a band of adventurers for robbing a noble, but the elves might capture the party and leave their fate in the hands of the victim. Agents of the Serpentine Table do steal from one client on behalf of another, but only with good reason -- never simply to fulfill a client's greed. House Phiarlan also perform other criminal acts under the right circumstances, but organizations like the Boromar Clan or House Tarkanan (see [Sharn: City of Towers](#)) are the primary sources of thieves and assassins.

The power of the Serpentine Table does have limits. House Phiarlan has spies hidden within the Aurum, Order of the Emerald Claw, or the Twelve. But the Lords of Dust, Dreaming Dark, and the Chamber are ancient and powerful forces with excellent counterintelligence. House Phiarlan can't watch every cult of the Dragon Below or every Dhakaani clan. The Serpentine Table doesn't have agents in every thorp or guild. Ultimately, the DM must decide what House Phiarlan knows and what has been successfully hidden from their prying eyes.

Serving the Shadow

Many members of House Phiarlan serve as passive agents of the house. In addition to passing information to the

Serpentine liaison, Phiarlan elves may assist the Table in many other ways. The celebrated actress may be too busy to serve as an active spy and assassin, but she can give Serpentine agents a place in her entourage -- or help a spy assume her identity for a particular mission.

A player character -- even one with the Favored in House feat -- must earn a place with the Serpentine Table. If he shows potential, the Serpentine Table asks him to serve as an observer initially. This duty calls for him to pass along information he acquires on his adventures, and it encourages him to make contacts that could prove useful to the house. In time, he is given small assignments and missions that tie into a particular adventure. On a dungeon delve, he might be asked to swap a particular piece of treasure with a forgery provided by the house and then return the true treasure to the house. He could be given a package to deliver to an innkeeper along the road, an amulet to slip into a nobleman's purse, or a *scrying beacon* to place in a critical location. If he performs admirably, he eventually may be inducted as a shadow of the Serpentine Table. At this point his missions may form the basis for entire adventures.

No membership dues exist for members of the Serpentine Table; on the contrary, agents are paid a regular salary, along with generous rewards for dangerous missions. The ranks within the house are described below. As a general rule, a Serpentine agent must have ranks in three or more of the following skills: Bluff, Disguise, Gather Information, Hide, Knowledge (any), Listen, Move Silently, Open Lock, Search, or Spot. Exceptions may be made for spellcasters whose magical abilities make up for their lack of training.

Shadows are the least agents of the Table. To hold this position, a character must have seven or more ranks in three of the Serpentine skills. Shadows receive 10 gp each month as a retainer in addition to bonuses for completing tasks.

Wraiths are gifted agents who often coordinate groups of shadows. A wraith must possess nine or more ranks in four of the Serpentine skills. Wraiths receive 50 gp each month as a retainer.

Spectres are elite troubleshooters. A spectre must possess twelve or more ranks in four of the Serpentine skills, and she receives 200 gp each month as a retainer.

Ghosts are the legends of the house. Only a handful of these agents exist, and their identities are carefully guarded. A ghost needs to have fifteen or more ranks in four of the Serpentine skills. A ghost receives 1,000 gp each month as a retainer and has access to many resources within the house. However, as the top agents of the house, ghosts are almost always on assignment -- a PC who rises to this rank will have little time for random adventures.

Above the ghosts are the lords of the Serpentine Table. An elf cannot rise to this position based on skill alone; she must serve the house for centuries before she can even be considered for induction into the inner circle. The lords are not necessarily as powerful as the ghosts, but what they lack in character level they make up for in cunning and wisdom.

Only elves of House Phiarlan have ever been accepted as members of the Serpentine Table, and this is unlikely to change. People of all races and nations may be used as tools and observers, but they are never treated as equals or brought into the confidence of the Table. In the case of a player character, his adventuring companions are seen as assets he brings to the house. An elf can gain status within House Phiarlan by assisting the Serpentine Table. But if he chooses to become a full agent of the Serpentine Table, he can have no loyalty above the house.

About the Author

Keith Baker has been an avid fan of **Dungeons & Dragons** since grade school. His life took a dramatic turn in 2002 when he submitted the world of **Eberron** to the Wizards of the Coast Fantasy Setting Search. In addition to developing the **Eberron** Campaign Setting and *Shadows of the Last War*, he has worked for Atlas Games, Goodman Games, and Green Ronin.

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